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ABSTRACT

A faculty member at the University of Toronto (Ontario) developed an informal survey designed to assess her undergraduate students' views of the writing they did during the course of their university studies. The survey consisted of a 2-page questionnaire that could be completed in 5 to 10 minutes; it was administered to 722 students during the academic years 1989-1990 and 1990-1991. The students were already in "writing intensive" courses, in that the writing of essays, reports, and essay type exams was essential to all their course work. The university prides itself on maintaining an emphasis on writing throughout its curriculum based on the British tradition of expecting students to write many essays. Analysis of the questionnaire responses suggested that there is a gap of attitude and understanding between the institution and the students on the importance and role of writing in university education. In particular, responses showed that students' enjoyment of writing is much stronger than their self-confidence; that as students move through their undergraduate career their self-confidence remains low and enjoyment also decreases; that students take writing seriously; that they are dissatisfied with the way writing is used in their education (because of uninteresting and artificial essay topics and dislike of the forms of academic writing); and that succeeding means getting the spelling, punctuation and grammar right. Further, the study suggests that student experience of learning by writing is one of restriction and punishment--a current of red marks all over their texts. The University of Toronto has recently set up a consultative group on writing to advise the central administration about ways to help students learn to write. This study shows that teachers can at least be sure that what they have to offer is wanted. (JB)

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The University as Context for Writing: How Undergraduates See It

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The University as Context for Writing: How Undergraduates See It

Although many papers at this conference have been able to offer solutions to the problems of teaching writing to university students, I am here to reiterate one of the problems--or, more specifically, to outline the situation at one particular institution. I think many of you will recognize it.

The University of Toronto in Canada is a large research university; we take pride in having been called at one time "The Harvard of the North," and we like to remember the days when we ranked in the top ten in North America. Though a public institution and now obviously overenrolled, we retain an attitude of elitism in our treatment of undergraduates. We see ourselves as continuing the British tradition in expecting students to write many essays; and we assume that our students already have the command of language and writing techniques that will enable them to do so. Accordingly, U. of T. refuses to teach writing directly. We have no "Freshman Comp" because the English Department wants to devote itself solely to the teaching of literature; we have only a few embattled and isolated courses in writing and some struggling Writing Lab operations.

It was for one of these Writing Labs, out of the mainstream in a suburban campus, that I fostered a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum project for four years; and it was in this work that I put together some documentation showing how students felt about the writing they did at the University of Toronto. I worked with 25 or 30 classes a year, ranging from English and History to Anthropology and Biology. As a one-person operation on a fragmentary basis, I had to concentrate my efforts on leading in-class discussions about specific writing assignments--trying to help students see what was being asked of them and how they could best meet those demands. I began my preparations for each visit by talking to the professor about the aims of the course, the function of the current assignment in it, and what expectations he or she had of the piece to be written--trying to "figure out what the professor wanted," as students often say of their own task in doing academic writing. To match this "demand" emphasis, I also worked out a way of gauging the "supply" side of the relationship. I knew I couldn't keep students' interest or do anything valuable for them unless I could see how they were approaching their writing. So over my four years in this project I developed a method of getting preliminary comments from the students I was about to meet: a two-page questionnaire that they could fill out in 5 to 10 minutes during a class before my visit.

My respondents were in courses that were already "writing-intensive"--that is, they conducted their course work through the writing of essays, reports, and essay-type exams rather than solely through doing problem sets and multiple-choice exercises. The University of Toronto prides itself on maintaining an emphasis on writing throughout its curriculum; indeed, its president's discussion paper on institutional purpose a few years ago mentioned the responsibility of "every faculty member" to be "a model exponent and critic of language skills."[1] These, then, are students who have committed themselves to learning through writing and who are in an institution that is committed to writing as a means and a goal of education.

But my analysis of the 722 questionnaires from 1989-90 and 1990-91 suggests that there is a gap of attitude and understanding between the institution and the students on just this matter. The responses show both high hopes and profound disappointments on the students' part; they delineate a population that wants bread but feels it is being given a stone. I will

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cite some numerical measures of students' sense of themselves as writers, and will analyse the texts of their answers to open-ended questions. For those of us engaged in encouraging the use of "writing to learn" at universities, the implications are both stimulating and disturbing.

The questionnaire itself was originally put together in 1988 by three people in the Teaching-Learning Centre, each with different goals. The new director, Peter Saunders, wanted especially to sound out the possibility of setting up a program of business and technical writing courses. An experienced Writing Lab tutor, Tamar Nelson, was interested in seeing how the amount of writing demanded in previous schooling affected students' confidence. For my part, I just wanted to be sure I had some idea of what lay behind those seas of faces I would be looking at in my class presentations.

This set of purposes resulted in a two-page sequence of boxes to check off and lines to fill in with commentary. Starting with an encouraging statement that the purpose of the questionnaire is "to help your instructors get a better understanding of your goals and career ambitions, as well as your feelings about writing," the form asks for name (optional) and identifying information, and goes on to this set of questions, with either boxes or blank lines to fill in. (A copy of the complete questionnaire is attached as an Appendix to this paper.)

1. How would you rate your writing skills? [four boxes to choose from]
2. Do you enjoy writing? [three boxes to choose from]
3. What do you enjoy about writing? [four blank lines]
4. What do you dislike about writing? [four blank lines]
5. {A detailed question about how many pieces of writing the student did in the last school year, how long they were, and whether they were done at high school or Erindale College. The results are not part of my analysis.}
6. What are your writing strengths and weaknesses [five blank lines]
7. (a) Is English your first language? [boxes for yes/no]
   (b) What other language do you speak?
   (c) What other language do you read and write?
8. What is your field of study?
9. What would you like to do for a living? [three blank lines]
10. {A question about the importance of writing in future careers.}
11. {A question about students' level of interest in taking career-related writing courses.}

Comments: [five blank lines]

The willingness of the 722 respondents to discuss their attitudes has been a continuing encouragement for me to believe that students are interested in writing. They filled in extensive and eloquent responses, with about 45 of the 722 adding an extra comment that they were pleased to have been asked.

The repetitive and unmathematical nature of this set of topics has turned out to be its value as a window into students' feelings. I have been able to see from different angles the ways students rate themselves as writers, and I have also acquired an anthology of expressive comments about their feelings. The questions were easy enough to answer that students did not become bogged down at any one stage, and the sequence allows for correlation of various

responses. In particular, the results let me see the two main topics, self-confidence and enjoyment, first in simple numerical figures, and then as short texts that can be analysed stylistically. The factual answers to such questions as year and field of study and other languages spoken can also be easily manipulated by a basic database program to show the effects of various factors.

The main questions occur on the first page, asking respondents for quick self-ratings on skills and enjoyment, and then for up to eight lines of comments on what they enjoy and what they dislike about writing. Translating the ratings into numbers gives a fairly narrow range of figures, some of which show mainly the obvious: that English majors like writing more than most other students, that ESL students feel they are not good writers, and that those who intend to be writers when they graduate (45 out of 722) consider themselves better at writing than those who intend to be accountants. I did not find significant differences between the answers of men and women.

Nevertheless, the table below does show two distinct trends. First of all, students make clear that their enjoyment of writing is much stronger than their self-confidence: the average score is only 2.45 out of 4 for question 1, whereas for question 2 it is 2.34 out of 3 (or 3.11 when harmonized to a base of 4).[2] Watching the scores change when the groups are tabulated by year of study is even more arresting: the self-rating in question 1 does not improve as students move through university, and the enjoyment of writing declines appreciably:

AVERAGE SCORES

	rating/4	enjoyment/3	enjoyment/4
ALL (722)	**2.45**	**2.34**	**3.11**
Year 1 (343)	**2.50**	**2.42**	**3.22**
Year 2 (169)	**2.33**	**2.46**	**3.27**
Year 3 (111)	**2.47**	**2.35**	**3.13**
Year 4 (79)	**2.46**	**2.20**	**2.92**

Students' discussion answers to questions 3 and 4 go a long way towards explaining how and why this decline happens. Their answers--though hastily scribbled in 5 or 10 minutes at the end of a class--display an impressive force, depth, and range of commentary on themselves and on their university experience. Here is a representative set of responses to

question 3, "What do you enjoy about writing?"

3.1 I enjoy being able to write exactly what I feel, without having to limit myself. It is through writing that I can truly be myself.

3.2 Creation--making something that didn't exist before and doing it in a clear, even illuminating manner.

3.3 I like reading a piece and knowing that I created it. I also like it when, in the middle of a piece, it seems to write itself--it's no longer work.

3.4 The expressing of thoughts allows me to tune in to feelings, opinions and thoughts I may not have been aware of.

3.5 The freedom to express yourself on paper and confront your ideas.

3.6 Struggling to articulate thoughts and feelings.

3.7 The accomplishment of seeing my own thoughts written down coherently and even sometimes intelligently.

3.8 I enjoy the flow of ideas that emerge as I am writing. Quite often I am unaware of these specific ideas until they are on paper in front of me.

3.9 As I write more often, my thoughts seem to be clearer. This clearer thinking allows me to be more expressive and decisive in what I want to say.

3.10 When I am interested in the topic, writing is a way of teaching myself about that subject in a way that I'll remember.

3.11 Writing an essay allows me to see all points of an argument and then construct a logical answer.

3.12 It gives me a chance to say how I feel, with no arguments.

3.13 How writing or the written word is generally believed to be truth because someone has taken the time to write down his/her thoughts.

3.14 The way words move people.

3.15 I find I can express myself better in writing than orally, so I like the feeling of getting my ideas across. I also like playing with the language--rearranging, making things as concise and powerful as possible, etc.

3.16 It's fun.

First of all, it is clear that these students take writing seriously. They answer this question primarily in terms of its value as an educational experience, describing writing as personal growth (428 out of 722) and as learning (151 out of 722). The terms they use express the satisfactions of intellectual ownership: to be "truly myself," to think my own thoughts and test them against facts, "to confront [my] ideas." These are all noble goals, just what the institution says it wants to nourish. Moreover, responses such as numbers 3.6 to 3.11 here show a recognition that the writing process can be creative and enriching, a way of clarifying thought. Students already think in the "process" paradigm that theoreticians are struggling to get university teachers to recognize. A few comments are immature or unrealistic, and there is a weakness in recognizing writing as a way to communicate with others (only 89 out of 722), although 87 students, unprompted, brought up the idea that written discourse is superior to oral. The eloquence of these comments is moving; this is not a post-literate generation, but rather one that assigns almost magical value to writing as self-realization.

But it also seems to be a group that feels deeply frustrated by its actual experience of academic writing. The answers to question 4, "What do you dislike about writing?," pour out students' dissatisfaction not only with their own work but also with the way writing is used in their education. Uninteresting and artificial essay topics are a recurrent complaint--to the chagrin of the faculty members who have seen these results. Students also note a "false façade" in academic writing style--they feel it contradicts their knowledge of how satisfying writing can be as self-expression and self-development. The answers are dominated by one repeated metaphor, evident in 253 answers out of 722, that of rigid forms and enclosures. As students say in the samples below, they feel boxed in and confined by what they perceive as the artificial forms of academic writing.

4.1 What I dislike is writing something for class which may not be under my own will. Writing to me is freedom, and I value doing it when I feel a need.
4.2 Dislike the narrow parameters of essay topics.
4.3 Being boxed in by unimaginative essay topics and artificial requirements
4.4 Writing in a fixed area/field, being confined to a topic not of my choosing.
4.5 I don't like the false façade that people put on when they write.
4.6 Struggling to use fancy words and set formats when speaking would say it better.
4.7 Being given unnecessary guidelines on what to write and how. If you can write, being told how to do it takes the fun out of it.
4.8 I find writing frustrating when the ideas and structure must be forced. This is obvious to the reader.
4.9 Second guessing the reader's preferred form of writing, rather than being able to follow a way that suits your ideas.

As a practitioner of writing instruction, I want to rush in and change such perceptions with inspiring statements of my own. Topics (I want to say) can be reformulated and refocussed so as to make them interesting and stimulating; professors' guidelines on how to write are meant to help, not hinder; requirements such as footnotes are justified by the nature of academic discourse; the essay form is the culmination of a long and noble history of rational thought. Such exhortations are the tools of my trade, and probably of yours; but I now hear the voices of students' disillusionment when I use them.

The other note sounded here is that of lament for inner deficiency--or at least that is the way students state it. Those same students who hoped for so much from the experience of writing blame themselves for their disappointment as much as they blame the institution. Compared to 253 complaints about the constrictions of imposed form, 207 students out of 722 discussed their struggle to produce writing and 236 rushed to state that they disliked writing because they couldn't do it well, with deficiency in "grammar" mentioned in 118 cases. It is clear from many answers to question 4 that worry spoils the experience of writing for many students. Too many of these comments express unnecessary and curable pain:

4.10 What I dislike is getting started. It's hard getting the words down on paper. Sometimes I just don't know what I want to say or what I can say.
4.11 Finally getting my ideas right and then having them misinterpreted or denied, or

even just ignored because they're not the same as taught in class.

4.12 Not knowing what I'm supposed to produce, or how to get from here to there.

4.13 I hate trying to write in proper form. I don't know whether I should concentrate on the form or my thoughts and ideas.

4.14 Feeling stupid for making it sound so simple--sometimes I have the sense, "The professor must think I'm an idiot." Or trying to sound more dignified and getting everything all tangled up.

4.15 Spelling, grammar, punctuation, expressing ideas in as few words as possible, problems of paragraph organization, importance of points to make, connecting paragraphs.

4.16 Tenses, sentence structure--terrible at it

4.17 The numerous rules within some forms of writing. I write abstract and sentence fragments usually, though this is incorrect to do so.

4.18 I sometimes get carried away and do not follow the rules of punctuation.

4.19 I dislike trying to remember all the rules and restrictions. I don't think I was taught enough about grammar and writing in high school and now I find it difficult.

4.20 That I cannot always say what I want to say, the way I want it said, because I have to watch my writing styles not to make grammatical errors.

4.21 That it was not reinforced enough for me to write better.

The answers to question 6 (on the back of the sheet), "What are your writing strengths and weaknesses?," confirm the impression of students struggling against odds that seem to them insuperable. The fullness and detail of their analyses are impressive: these are students who have already thought about this question. In spite of the phrasing of the prompt ("strengths and weaknesses"), 525 students out of 722 mention their weaknesses first (often omitting to discuss strengths at all). Students may well be right that they are weak in using language correctly (280) and in organizing their argument (230), especially if organization is conceived of rigidly.

It is even more alarming, however, that 168 students--nearly a quarter of the total--think that spelling, grammar, and punctuation are their strengths as writers. Evidently the volume of red ink in margins has convinced many that "getting it right" is the main requirement of academic writing. Encouragingly, 215 still hang on to the hope that creativity or good ideas can be considered a strength; but they are outnumbered by the 448 altogether who consider that correctness of grammar, spelling, and punctuation is the criterion on which they should judge themselves. A striking number can name the exact kinds of errors they hav been told they make. Many of the comments are painful to read as a delineation of what students think the institution wants from them. The lack of proportion displayed by many answers below is embarrassing. We should also be concerned by the strength of students' feeling that they face the blank paper alone, as in the final quotations:

6.1 I'm not sure I have any strengths. I can organize things logically in point form, everything else is weak!

6.2 I am strong in content analysis, but weak in that I only qualify for B marks.

6.3 I am good at making comparisons, drawing analogies, analyzing ideas, and

creating generalizations, but terrible at arranging the essay the right way.

6.4 My strengths are concrete and pertinent examples. The structure of my essay is fairly good. My weaknesses are my inability to spell, grammatical errors (i.e. past and present tense mixed together) and occasionally I do not tie paragraphs together smoothly. Dangling modifiers have been a problem.

6.5 STRENGTHS: ideas, style, being creative, assertive
WEAKNESSES: vagueness, where to put apostrophes, sometimes spelling, handwriting, footnotes

6.6 I believe overall that the correct punctuation is my weakest skill while neatness and legibility rank a close second.

6.7 My weaknesses in writing are overall grammar and structure.

6.8 Overall, I think my writing is good. Weaknesses would include spelling and not dealing directly with the issue I am trying to write about.

6.9 I am poor at organizing thought, very good with spelling and grammar.

6.10 Strengths: good spelling, fairly good grammar. Weaknesses: format, content.

6.11 My strengths are my spelling and my grammar. My weaknesses are making stupid mistakes and filling my papers with useless information.

6.12 STRENGTHS: I can develop an argument logically and express it in an interesting fashion WEAKNESS: I can get muddled in complexity through awkward grammar structure or spelling.

6.13 I have excellent ideas but I cannot write clearly and concisely, or correctly. I just can't seem to get things the way they're supposed to be.

6.14 My ideas aren't as clear to the reader as they are to me.

6.15 My strengths are my ideas and approach to a subject. My weaknesses are that I confuse some points, my sentences have syntax problems, and often I lack understanding of what I am supposed to say.

6.16 I do not finish sentences and I do not make good arguments.

6.17 When I write I make many grammatical errors. Sometimes it's hard to be creative in my writing. I know I am not saying what I want to, or what I should be.

6.18 I can't get started because I know I am going to make so many mistakes that it's hardly worth trying.

The lack of confidence implied by the numerical scores of the first questions in my questionnaire, then, is further defined by these discursive comments. Students have high hopes for the act of writing as a way to learn and grow intellectually; but they discover that the writing expected at university is often a matter of fitting into pre-set forms and struggling with language unsupported.

As university instructors in composition and communication, we have come to Cincinnati to discuss "Contexts, Communities, and Constraints" in our profession. My study suggests that for one defined group of university students the context provided for their attempts to learn by writing is largely that of restriction and punishment--literally, a concurrent text of red marks all over their texts. The community embodied in my institution appears to students to be a hierarchy, based on largely unstated rules, that mocks and

excludes many. The constraints are evident: a set of "boxes" into which students' writing must fit at whatever cost to the writers themselves.

No individual instructor of writing or any other subject can hope to solve these problems alone. We are here because we know that. But I do see some ways by which writing teachers and faculty as a whole can limit the damage to self-confidence and the loss of respect for the university system that are made visible here. First, we need to offer a clearer definition of academic writing, not only by carefully designing assignments, but also by explicit discussion of the function of each assignment within course structures and of the process of writing to learn. Professors can meet the needs expressed here by showing that they see student writing as a way of participating in their disciplines. The more attention paid to discourse in itself, the more students will see that writing (as well as reading and oral discussion) is genuinely a part of learning.

Secondly, the problems of correctness that bedevil students need to be attacked. We know that there are, after all, ways to help students recognize the patterns of standard English and improve their production of it. Those methods of learning should be made available in as much variety as possible--attention within classes in all subjects, provision of self-help material, establishment of writing labs and writing courses. (It is notable that almost all students answering the questionnaire expressed interest in taking further writing courses.) Here is a cry for help that should not be drowned out by the despairing chorus of professors' lamentations about their students' poor writing. Students are in fact calling for the same kind of attention to writing skills as their professors are. As part of their community, we need to listen to them and be ready to teach in whatever ways are helpful.

The University of Toronto has just set up a consultative group on writing to advise the central administration about ways in which we can better help students learn to write. In asking for submissions from faculty, it has heard roars of frustration about falling standards and inadequate products--you know the sort of thing because it has become a staple of journalism across North America, emanating from business and the public as well as from educators. I hope that my administration (and yours) will also listen to student comments such as the ones I have gathered. They show that students want to write better and are frustrated by the present unsupportive and constrictive context that their academic community now provides them. As flag-carriers for the idea that people can learn by writing, we teachers of composition and cross-curricular writing will need to keep our sense of proportion along with our usual patience. My study shows that we can be sure, at least, that what we have to offer is wanted.

NOTES

1. George E. Connell, Renewal 1987: Summary of a discussion paper on the nature and role of the University of Toronto, p. 3.

2. I tabulated the answers on this basis:
   Question 1, "How would you rate your writing skills?":
   poor = 1, fairly good = 2, good = 3, excellent = 4.
   Question 2, "Do you enjoy writing?:
   no = 1, sometimes = 2, yes = 3.

Erindale College Student Questionnaire

Why this questionnaire? The purpose of this questionnaire is to help your instructors get a better understanding of your goals and career ambitions, as well as your feelings about writing. Please take ten minutes to answer these questions. All answers will be considered confidential. Thank you.

Peter Saunders
Margaret Procter

Name_____

Student Number_____Your age_____

Telephone_____Date_____

1. How would you rate your writing skills?

   ☐ poor skills ☐ good skills
   ☐ fairly good skills ☐ excellent skills

2. Do you enjoy writing?

   ☐ yes ☐ no ☐ sometimes

3. What do you enjoy about writing?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. What do you dislike about writing?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

5. (a) How many pieces of writing (essays, book reviews, reports, etc.) did you do in your studies last year? (Refer to a full school year.)

   ☐ 1-3 ☐ 4-10 ☐ more than 10

   (b) How long were they usually? ☐ 1-5 pages ☐ 6-10 pages ☐ longer.

   (c) This was at Erindale College ☐ OR high school ☐ .

6. What are your writing strengths and weaknesses?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. (a) Is English your first language? ☐ yes ☐ no
   (b) What other language do you speak? _____
   (c) What other language do you read and write? _____

8. What is your field of study? _____

9. What would you like to do for a living?

_____

_____

_____

10. How important do you think writing skills will be in achieving success in your chosen career?
    - ☐ very important
    - ☐ fairly important
    - ☐ not important

11. Would you consider taking additional writing courses (e.g., technical writing, business report writing) if these courses related closely to your future occupation?
    - ☐ yes
    - ☐ no

Comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____